

#150 GENE HUGGINS: CARPENTER'S MATE ABOARD THE USS *VESTAL*

Bart Fredo (BF): Let's see, the following interview of Gene Huggins was conducted on 12-2-86 in Honolulu at about, oh, one-thirty in the afternoon. Mr. Huggins lives in Hemet, California. The interview was conducted by Bart Fredo and assisted by Dan Martinez of the National Park Service.

Mr. Huggins, let me start off briefly by asking you to give us your full name and where you were from back in 1941.

Gene Huggins (GH): My full name is Albert Eugene Huggins and I was originally from Lomita, California, then I joined the Navy in '39 and we came to Honolulu the first time in 1940.

BF: In 1941, what was your rank and what was your job?

GH: I was a Carpenter's Mate Second Class on board the USS *VESTAL* a repair ship.

BF: And what brought you to Hawaii and how did you How did you get here?

GH: Well, the Pacific Fleet was transferred from San Pedro to Pearl Harbor and we were a repair ship, so we were stationed here from March of 1940 until the Japs hit December the seventh.

BF: That morning, December seventh, what were you doing?

GH: We had just got a good pinochle game started down at the carpenter's shop and they ordered all hands to quarters and we was bitching, "This is Sunday, what they holding quarters for?"

So we went up on topside and it looked like they was having a swell mock battle going. But then, a plane banked and I saw those two big red dots and I said, "No, this ain't no mock battle."

So me and another carpenter's mate run back to our five-inch guns and tried to get the five-inch guns into action and the five-inch gun had a -- the ammunition box had a padlock on it so we couldn't even open it. So we just stood there and watched them lay seven torpedoes into the *WEST VIRGINIA* and *OKLAHOMA* tied up behind us there until the plane came in and dropped this one torpedo and I followed it, and it was headed right for our fantail, so I followed it until it got about halfway, and I thought, "I better get out of here." So I went up and I was standing about three feet from where open carpenter's shop hatch, when this fourteen-inch armor piercing shell with fins on it went through the open carpenter's shop hatch, went through the ship, the shop, the boilermaker's shop and right on out the bottom of the ship, but never did go off.

And so I knew something had happened, so I run over and I was looking down the carpenter's shop hatch when that torpedo that I had seen coming toward us must have went underneath us and hit the *ARIZONA*. So when . . . about that time, the *ARIZONA* blew up from that torpedo -- at least I figured it was a torpedo -- and it knocked me down and the flames were shooting over on our ship and everything. And I just got up when the explosion, force of it, knocked us

-- there was a bunch of us that blew out into the water out there. And the first thing I did was kick my shoes off and head for dry land. That was over at Aiea over there and the whaleboat came by and picked us up and took us over to Aiea. And they tried to put us down in the building, in the basement of the recreation building over at Aiea. But me and another Carpenter's Mate said if we was going to see what got us, we wanted to see it. So we didn't go down below, we stood out there and watched it then. And that's when the *ARIZONA* finally blew all to pieces, when the . . . that fourteen-inch armor-piercing shell with fins on it must have hit the powder magazine and blew the *ARIZONA* all to pieces.

BF: What did you see when that happened? What did it look like?

GH: It was one heck of a mess! (Chuckles) It just . . . I couldn't imagine that one bomb could do that much, one explosion could do that much damage because it just blew all to pieces, see. And the conning tower, the whole structure and everything just bent and doubled.

BF: When you first saw them, the attacking planes, what was going through your mind? What were you thinking about?

GH: We didn't know. We didn't have the faintest idea what was going on. We thought it was . . . they was always having the mock battle before the war, you know, even though we had the dog fights. And we thought that's what it was until the plane came and I saw those two red dots. And then when we saw that the torpedo plane . . . we watched the torpedo plane, you could come right in, they'd come low, drop the torpedo and you could follow that torpedo right until it hit the *OKLAHOMA* and *WEST VIRGINIA* tied up right in front of us there. And then the planes would bank, and they would come right over us, so if I had a slingshot, you could have hit them with a slingshot because you sat there and you could see the pilot with his goggles and everything. And we didn't have nothing to shoot with and nothing else.

BF: How long was it, from the time the attack started to the time you were blown off the ship into the water?

GH: Well, I didn't have my watch on, but they say that the *ARIZONA* sank in nine minutes, but that wasn't from the start, it wasn't the first explosion, because it had to be for quite a while, because we stood back there and watched them lay those seven torpedoes, and I watched this other one. And it had to be at least fifteen minutes before I got blown over the side.

BF: And how long were you in the water?

GH: I wasn't in the water but about fifteen minutes.

BF: We have to stop there because we're out of tape. We'll put in another tape.

END OF VIDEOTAPE ONE

VIDEOTAPE TWO

GH: I watched the Oklahoma roll over and that was before the Arizona had blown up.

BF: Let's bring you back, unless you want to pursue this . . . ?

Daniel Martinez (DM): No, that's . . .

BF: How long do you think you were in the water?

GH: Well, I would say it was about approximately two minutes before the whale boat came by and picked us up and took us over to the -- we called it the Aiea recreation building. It was evidently not at Aiea, but it was across the channel from where the vessel was there.

BF: An attack is still going on while this is happening?

GH: Yeah, right, yeah, yeah. Yeah, they were dropping -- the dive bombers and the high altitude bombers were doing it. And then the whaleboat took us over to the rec[reation] building over there and then we stood there and watched the high altitude bombers and the dive bombers come in. And the *NEVADA* got up steam then and she started up the channel. And when she got about halfway up the channel, the first five dive bombers that dove on her missed her completely, and then about the next six dive bombers took her right in the row, and she was bouncing in the water there. And you could see she was crippled pretty badly. So the guy around her, stuck her in the mud up there by the other end of Ford Island up there.

BF: What else was your attention directed to besides the *NEVADA* while you were over at Aiea Rec[reation] Center?

GH: Well, I watched the high altitude bombers and you could follow that doggone fourteen-inch armor-piercing shell with fins on it from the time they dropped it right until the time it hit whatever they was aiming at. And the reason that we knew that it was a fourteen-inch armor-piercing shell with fins on it was because we got two of those hits on the *VESTAL*. One of them went through the bottom of the ship, the other one went through the focsle, the mess deck and landed in the metal supply rack in GSK. And it exploded, and we found pieces of it and we could tell from the circumference that it was fourteen-inch and it had rifling on it, so we knew it was fourteen-inch armor-piercing with fins on it. So we kept that thing around the ship for a long time.

BF: Did you feel frustrated you couldn't do anything?

GH: There's no feeling like it, yeah. All we could do was stand back there. If I had an orange, I could've hit the dog-gone planes when they come over. But we just stand back there and look, see.

BF: You must have been angry.

GH: Very frustrating, (chuckles) yeah.

BF: Would anger be a good word to describe, or is frustration a better . . .

GH: Frustration is a better one, yeah.

BF: What was the rest of the day like?

GH: Well, the rest of the day, they put us over at Aiea there and they gave us an Army machine gun to man and said, "Now, don't shoot 'cause we ain't got no ammunition."

So we dug a foxhole over there and then that night we had an Army short-wave radio in the foxhole with us and it came over the short-wave radio that the Japs had landed, gave the color of the uniforms and everything else. And we had rifles with us that time and so that night when we hollered, "Halt," and nobody answered back, we started shooting. And the next morning we had cats and dogs every so often around there from where we had hit 'em, see.

BF: How long was it before you realized the next day that these reports about landings were false?

GH: Oh, we realized that night about ten o'clock, they had told us then that they weren't really landed, so . . .

BF: What happened to some of your friends that day?

GH: Well, we don't . . . we were lucky, we only lost seven guys on our ship. And one of the guys was . . . we had a little partition between the carpenter ship and the shipper's shop and he was bent over going through there when that bomb went through the carpenter's shop and the shrapnel took off both cheeks of his fanny and (chuckles) and he wound up in the hospital, but he was all right. He's been going to the ship's reunion, so, yeah.

BF: Were you wounded at all?

GH: Huh?

BF: Were you wounded?

GH: No. I got hit in the, with a piece of flat metal.

BF: Near your ankle?

GH: Yeah, and it bruised my leg. And after I got back on board ship, December 8, and I was in the sick bay for a week because my leg swelled up, but I wasn't wounded.

BF: What was life like for the next few days?

GH: Well, it was a mess. The vessel was flooded up to the carpenter's shop hatch, I mean the carpenter's shop deck. So, but we still slept on our cots down in the carpenter's shop down there. But one of the fellows that had got, he got killed and his body, after so many days, was pretty rancid so we had to find him and get him out of there. But we were lucky, we only lost seven guys on the vessel.

BF: Were you much involved in any of the rescue or repair work?

GH: Yeah, I made the first dive on the vessel to see how bad the hole was in the bottom of the ship there. And then we put a caisson around it and caulked it and then they filled it with cement, and then pumped the water out and they stuck it in dry dock over here.

BF: How big was that hole?

GH: It was about three-foot and the pieces of metal hung down about thirty inches.

BF: A lot of things happened to you that day, and you saw a lot, but is there, are there one or two things that stick out in your mind more than anything else?

GH: No. It was just one heck of a surprise is all.

BF: Nothing that's more vivid than anything else? One memory.

GH: Well, I can say that's the first time in my life I was ever scared was when I got knocked down and the flames was shooting over on our ship. When I got up, that's the only time in my life I can really say I was scared.

BF: The only time?

GH: Yeah. That's the only time I was ever really scared. I've been in a lot of dangerous situations but I was never scared like that. (Chuckles)

Daniel Martinez (DM): Did you have a crewmember, a crewmen that you knew on the *ARIZONA* that was lost aboard that ship?

GH: Yeah, I had went to school with a kid that was on the Arizona, and so December 6 -- see, we pulled alongside the Arizona Friday, December 5. And we were supposed to start Monday to overhaul her. And so Saturday I went over and looked up this kid I used to go to school with, Eddie Tapie was his name and I talked to him and everything, and he didn't get off. His name was on the marble slab up there on the *ARIZONA*.

BF: Any other friends?

GH: No. Just one kid -- other kid that I went to school with, in fact he graduated with me. He had just shipped over, so he had thirty days' leave and he hit San Francisco the day that the Japs hit us here and they turned and put him on a ship and said, "Fly back to Honolulu!" So he didn't even get to go ashore in San Francisco there.

BF: Briefly, what happened to you in the weeks and months following the attack?

GH: Well, after we got the hole fixed in the vessel, the guy says, "Boy, we're going to go back to the States and get an overhaul."

And I says, "Yeah."

"We're going to go for the South."

And I says, "I don't want to go for the South."

So I swapped duties with a guy on shore patrol, in Honolulu here. So I walked the beat on shore patrol from February until March of '43. And then I

went down to the submarine base as a diver and a lung instructor and I stayed there until June of '44. So I finally got back to the States in June of '44.

BF: What was martial law like, first few days, first few weeks after the attack?

GH: Well, that's the blackout and you couldn't do nothing, even on shore patrol. We had our barracks was right there in town and we'd walk a beat and then go back to our barracks at night, and everything was blacked out. So that was no fun, none of that blackout was.

BF: Think of any stories, any incidents that happened during your time as a shore patrolman?

GH: Yeah, there was a lot of that. (Laughs)

BF: What kinds of incidents would you mainly deal with?

GH: A lot of drunken sailors. (Chuckles) Yeah. Because at that time, you could only get so many drinks, you was only allowed so many drinks and they'd go get all the drinks they could in one place and then go to the next one, see. And they'd get just drunk and we just -- man, we arrested the guys so that they'd make sure that they got back to ship, was the main reason that we'd arrest them. When they saw, when we saw that they were too drunk to get back to ship when we would arrest them and then, because then the paddy wagon took them back to the ship in the night, in the evening, see. So they all got back.

DM: What were some of the favored bars that people went to during the Honolulu days?

GH: Oh, there was Lau Yee Chai's. Lau Yee Chai's used to be way out on Waikiki there and -- you know, I can't . . . Lau Yee Chai's the only one that I can remember the name of. But there was quite a few of the bars out there. There wasn't any other thing out there, much, at Waikiki. Yeah.

BF: You played a part in a very significant, a very important event in history. Has that affected your life at all?

GH: No, but it brings back some great memories of all the things that we used to do and everything, yeah. Yeah.

BF: Is it something that you think about, you have thought about regularly since the event?

GH: Oh yeah, yeah. That's why I come back over to Honolulu here all the time. I used to go out on the memorial there and give speeches with the Pearl Harbor Survivors organization that is here. And that was always a lot of fun.

BF: Do you relive the day?

GH: No, I don't (laughs) wanna relive on it, but I do remember it, yes. Yeah, yeah.

BF: Stop.

(Conversation off-mike)

BF: (To GH) Now, look at me when you answer him, okay?

DM: I want to know what your feelings are towards the Japanese today as opposed to '41, and do you think it would be possible in the fiftieth anniversary to meet with Japanese survivors?

GH: Well, yeah. I do. Even when I used to give speeches on the *ARIZONA* Memorial out there, they would want to take, have their picture taken with me and everything and I didn't have no qualms about that. The only things is I do no, I have not owned a Japanese automobile to this day (chuckles), so . . .

BF: Because of that?

GH: Yeah, right. (Laughs) I'm prejudiced that I want an American automobile.

DM: How about meeting with survivors?

GH: Yeah, that's -- sure. If I last to the fiftieth (laughs) I would be glad to, yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, in fact, at the forty-first over here, you know, they had some of the guys that hit Kaneohe over there and they came over, yeah. No, I don't -- the only thing I object to is that they didn't give us a little warning first. (Chuckles)

END OF INTERVIEW